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WW II tests of Plutonium in humans told

WASHINGTON (UPI) — Scientists in a secret government project injected 18 men, women and children, all of whom were considered terminally ill, with overdoses of bomb-grade plutonium three decades ago, federal researchers said Saturday.

Dr. James Liverman of the Energy Research and Development Administration said that the World War II-era experiment was forgotten for about 20 years and that records are sketchy today. But, he said, there is no evidence that any of the 18 suffered ill effects from their injections. Some of the injections were given at Billings Hospital in Chicago.

A science newsletter, Science Trends, said present-day researchers who recently learned of the experiment, find it ethically "reprehensible," but valuable from the lessons it taught about effects of plutonium exposure.

Liverman said three of the 18 subjects — two men and a woman — still are alive.

He said one, a black man in Texas, is "healthy for a man in his late 70s" and was told the nature of the injection about two years ago. The other three, Liverman said, are in their 90s and have not been told because of their mental or medical conditions.

He said "presumptive evidence," based largely on recent interviews with doctors about medical practices in the late 1940s, suggest that the first 17 people were told only that they were "in a terminal illness and the government wanted to inject them with hazardous material related to the war effort."

Selection of subjects was based on age and health, ERDA said. It said the preference was for persons 45 or older who were expected to die within 10 years of an existing disease.

A spokesman said seven subjects died within less than a year, three within one to three years, one after 14 years, one after 20 years and one about a year ago. Two are unaccounted for.

Plutonium is considered one of the most toxic substances known to man. Even small amounts are believed capable of causing cancer.

Liverman expressed hope that the rediscovery and renewed study of the 18 injection subjects, plus the cancer-free records of 25 persons exposed to plutonium in preparing early hydrogen bombs at Los Alamos, N.M., will help reduce fears about the danger of plutonium fuel in proposed nuclear breeder power reactors.